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ABSTRACT

Schools within schools are large public schools that have been divided into smaller autonomous subunits to create a sense of community and cohesiveness among students and staff. This digest discusses the benefits, drawbacks, varieties, and sources of funding for schools within schools. Designers of these schools seek the advantages of both large and small schools by placing students into small learning communities while using the resources of the larger existing facilities. Benefits include higher test scores relative to larger schools; enhancement of students' self-perceptions, both socially and academically; higher attendance and lower dropout rates; fewer discipline problems; and greater cost effectiveness. Possible drawbacks include emphasizing the sense of belonging over academic rigor, loss of teacher seniority if they are transferred between schools, and possible reduction in funding for equipment. School-within-school types are vertical-house plans, ninth-grade house plans, at-risk schools, career academies and clusters, special curriculum models, newcomer schools, parent-participation plans, advisory systems, and charter schools. Administrators must assess the need for and the purpose of their plan before committing resources for school restructuring. Some funding organizations are the Annenberg Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities program. (Contains 12 references.) (RT)

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Schools Within Schools

By Tobin McAndrews and Wendell Anderson

Growing numbers of educators and parents across the nation are drawn to the idea of downsizing schools. Numerous studies and successful model programs have confirmed the academic, social, and financial benefits of small-scale schooling. And thanks to several foundations and the U.S. Department of Education, funds are more readily available to reorganize large schools into smaller learning communities.

Most discussions of small schools focus on which model to choose and how best to implement the downsizing. One model that is gaining increasing favor is "schools within schools." The advantages, drawbacks, varieties, and sources of funding for schools within schools are discussed in this Digest.

What Are Schools Within Schools?

Schools within schools are large public schools that have been divided into smaller autonomous subunits. The National Association of Elementary School Principals officially recognizes a *school within a school* as "a separate entity, running its own budget and planning its own programs. However, school safety and building operation remain vested with the principal of the larger school, and use of shared space must be negotiated" (NAESP).

Designers of schools within schools seek the advantages of both large and small schools by placing students into small learning communities while using the resources of the larger existing facilities. Those resources include faculty and staff. "Small school," a type of school within a school, employs faculty and staff brought in from elsewhere in the district rather than from the larger school (NAESP).

A key organizational characteristic of the school within a school is that the program and individual classes remain small (Sicoli 2000). Researchers and reformers have identified the optimum number of students in a program to be as many as 500 and as few as 30. A number of factors, including reasons for the program and the size of the school in which the program will be housed, determine optimum size (Sicoli).

What Are Some of the Benefits of Small Schools?

Although few studies have been conducted on the school-within-a-school model itself, proponents infer that the benefits of a school within a school closely parallel those found in small schools, which have been widely investigated.

In 1996, a report from the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recommended smaller schools and smaller classes as essential for student improvement. Research shows that smaller learning environments create happier, safer, higher achieving students (Oxley 2001).

Summarized here are some of the advantages of small schools identified by researchers. Depending on physical layout and resources, the advantages of small schools can apply to schools within schools.

Academic benefits: Test scores of students in small schools are consistently higher than those in larger schools (McComb 2000; Jacobson, February 28, 2001). Administrators of small schools are also better able to reform their curricula and teaching strategies (McComb). Smaller class sizes and interdisciplinary methods allow greater contact between student and teacher. And because teachers in smaller schools tend to be more aware of student performance, student accountability is increased.

Social benefits: The greater sense of belonging that students feel in small schools fosters more caring through interpersonal relationships (Capps 1999). Small-school settings have been shown to enhance students' self-perceptions, both socially and academically (McPartland). Small schools also foster a more aware and involved faculty, which promotes positive student attitudes (McPartland). Additionally, in small schools there is more opportunity for student involvement in school activities because of less competition for membership on athletic teams and in clubs and student government (McComb).

Attendance and graduation benefits: The average national dropout rate for high schools with more than 1,000 students is 6.39 percent, whereas schools with fewer than 200 students have an average dropout rate of 3.47 percent (McComb). Research shows that small schools have higher rates of attendance than large schools have (Gewertz 2001). These variations may be due to the relative ease of staff members at the small-school level to recognize students and hold them accountable.

Safety and discipline benefits: Small schools generally have fewer discipline problems than larger schools. The strong parental support and adult connections often present in small schools create a safer environment for students. Strangers can be spotted more easily in small schools, which further promotes safety (McComb).

Financial benefits: Studies have shown that larger schools spend more per student as administrative costs grow with larger student bodies. Also, the cost of "learning per unit" is higher in larger schools as a result of their often less favorable academic outcomes (Lawton). A study in 1998 in New York City found that small schools were more cost effective because more of their students graduated on time (Gewertz).

What Are Some Drawbacks of Small Schools?

Support for small schools, however, is not unconditional. "Small, in and of itself, can be as silly as big," said Michelle Fine, a professor of psychology at the City University of New York (in Gewertz). "It will produce a sense of belonging almost immediately. But hugging is not the same as algebra. Rigor and care must be braided together, or we run the risk of creating small, nurturing environments that aren't schools" (Fine in Gewertz).

Several staffing issues arise when large schools are carved into smaller units. Some teachers worry that they may have to transfer from one school to another, may

lose seniority in doing so, may have to teach out of their specialty in a school with fewer course offerings, or may not truly gain the autonomy they desire in the downsizing of schools (Gewertz).

A survey by Public Agenda showed that parents and teachers chose reducing class size and improving discipline over making schools smaller as ways to improve the educational experience. A majority of teachers surveyed believed that smaller schools will have less money for equipment and that it will be more difficult for students who have problems with teachers to transfer out of classes (Jacobson, October 3, 2001).

To avoid segregation along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines, care must be taken when assigning students to smaller learning communities.

What Are Some Types of Schools Within Schools?

School-within-school plans were initially conceived to offer alternatives to parents who wanted a specialized education for their children not available through the normal school structure or standard curriculum. Administrators have devised a variety of plans in accordance with the special circumstances and resources of their districts. Nine such plans have become common.

Vertical-house plans: First instituted in the United Kingdom, these plans serve students in grades 9 through 12 or 10 through 12. Typically a school of 1,000 or more students is broken up into groups of several hundred students. Each "house" shares the same faculty and facilities but has autonomous policies for student discipline, activities, government, and parental involvement.

Ninth-grade house plans: These plans are similar to the vertical-house model but involve only the ninth grade (Cawelti 1993, Oxley).

At-risk schools: These plans serve students who have not responded well to traditional learning environments. A typical model includes traditional academic curriculum along with an academy program in which students learn a trade such as computer repair.

Career academies and clusters: In these models students engage in classes or house systems aligned with their interests and possible career choices.

Special-curriculum models: These schools offer advanced courses for high-achieving students. Students are divided into houses based on their special needs or interests (Cawelti).

Newcomer schools: Newcomer schools are sometimes established in areas where a large number of students—generally elementary school students—are entering a school system for the first time and having difficulty with the transition (Boloz and Blessing 1994).

Parent-participation plans: In these plans parents of elementary-school children are permitted to enroll their children in the school only after making a commitment to donate a specific amount of their time and energy as teachers.

Advisory systems: Under these systems students are placed under the guidance and care of either a teacher or administrator for their entire school experience. In effect, the student acquires a personal academic and social guidance counselor.

Charter schools: Similar to special-curriculum schools, charter schools develop curricula independent of the public system. Charter schools are generally developed by parents or teachers seeking an alternative to standard programs. Charter schools, nevertheless, are held to the same standards of educational achievement as public schools.

How Do Administrators Develop and Fund a School Within a School?

Developing a school within a school requires careful planning. Administrators must assess the need for and purpose of their plan before committing resources. Initial plans must include components for hiring faculty and staff, developing curriculum and admittance policies, and selecting facilities and equipment.

Additionally, administrators should decide the type and extent of possible subschooling systems to implement, such as programs in art, business, college prep, sciences, and community studies. The satisfaction of designing a school within a school is the nearly limitless possibilities. The scope of classes and programs that can be offered is only a matter of imagination coupled with resources.

In the nonprofit sector, the Annenberg Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have offered more than $1 billion for the planning and implementation of smaller learning communities. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has pledged more than $240 million over the next several years to help districts downsize their schools (Jacobson, October 3, 2001).

In the public sector, the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities program saw its budget increase nearly threefold to $125 million for the year 2001. Through various grants, the Department of Education offers administrators the opportunity to study the strategic feasibility of organizational methods and systems that will facilitate smaller learning communities. The grants can also be used to implement the outlined strategies for developing schools within schools, all without drawing on already stretched local budgets.

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